Tuning the Piano

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Tuning the Piano

by ecoutes

Summary

When the solo pianist for the Baltimore Philharmonic is suddenly murdered, it is Hannibal Lecter that takes her spot, catching the attention of a certain cellist by the name of Will Graham.

Russian translation by liwhzaa available here: https://ficbook.net/readfic/0189b1e1-22da-703f-9f99-393215d74a44

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> I originally posted this with "No Archive Warnings Apply" but looking back on it now there are a few descriptions of dead bodies, in the crime scene sense. Some of it is a bit bloody, but I don't think it is to the extent to apply the "Graphic Depictions of Violence" warning either. Again, no actual violence, just the results from murder(s). Just a heads up so you know what you'll be reading in case anyone is uncomfortable with that!

Will Graham adjusted the bowtie of his ill-fitted tuxedo and stepped into the grand concert hall. It looked nearly the same as always, with one exception. The grand piano, which normally sat at the back of the stage, was to be moved to the front, as the Baltimore Philharmonic was rehearsing Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. Naturally, the solo pianist was to be the focus of attention.

Blinking at the large Steinway, Will made his way to his seat, front row of the cello section, second chair. His stand partner and section leader, Freddie Lounds, hadn't arrived yet. Quiet chatter sounded around the stage, mainly about the piano soloist.

"I hear he's an exceptional pianist," said Alana Bloom, who sat directly on Will's right. She was the viola section leader, and was tuning her instrument as she said this. "Plays harpsichord as well."

Will made an ambiguous noise of disinterest. "He better be exceptional, since the concert is in a week. Really, Jack shouldn't have waited so long to rehearse with the soloist." Will was referring to Jack Crawford, the director of the orchestra. He gestured to his tuxedo and sighed. "And I can't believe he made us wear our concert attire."

Alana knit her brow, looking perplexed. Slowly, she asked, "You... know the reason for Crawford's delay... right?"

Tightening his bow and testing it on the strings of his cello, Will said, "Does it matter?" with distaste in his voice.

"We were supposed to have a different soloist, but she was found... murdered in her home. I thought you had known."

This was the first time Will was hearing this, likely proof of his inadequate social life. Shocked, he stared at his music stand, and echoed, "...Murdered? When?"

"Two... maybe three weeks ago. Crawford cancelled all those rehearsals, remember?"

Will did remember this. He hadn't bothered to think of the reason for all that cancelling, and hadn't seen any of the fellow orchestra members during those weeks of limbo, so no one had told him why. "Did they... find whoever did it?"

"I don't think so. The police are still looking." Alana had a faraway look in her eye. "But Crawford had to find another soloist for the Tchaikovsky because of it. Hence the..."

"Hence the last minute rehearsal, I see," Will finished.

He glanced at the piano. It was quite large, which seemed like it would be obvious, but Will hadn't expected it to nearly block so many players. The pianist was to sit near the concertmistress, and the other side of the piano stretched several feet past the conductor's podium, only stopping a few feet of Will, and Freddie, who had just arrived.

Will didn't say much to Freddie, and she did about the same. Most stand partners got along but unfortunately they were the exception. Additionally, Jack was saying some useless information, the replacement soloist's name, some notes, date of their final rehearsal before the concert. Nothing Will needed to really remember.

Instead Will observed the new set up, and saw the soloist (the replacement soloist technically, Will thought) arrive and take his seat.

The soloist was also wearing a tuxedo, though he had opted for a dark red pocket square, whereas the other musicians, including Will, had a white one. His ashy colored hair was effortlessly styled and swept away from the sharp lines of his face, and he carried a sense of elegance and pride even before his fingers touched the keys of the piano.

Will was skeptical. Despite all the elegance, he wasn't sure if this soloist would make the cut necessary for such a piece. Especially on such a short notice, too. Unless he had played it before, this rehearsal would not go well.

Will found that he was terribly wrong.

The orchestra played through the entire piece. Will knew this concerto by heart, and listened closely to the pianist. He would know if the soloist had messed up. Yet he heard no errors, instead hearing powerful chords and arpeggios.

Throughout the rehearsal, their eyes met several times. From his angle Will could clearly see the pianist's face. During the rests where the woodwinds played the melody, Will studied the man's physiognomy from afar, only to see that he was looking back. They gazed at each other, brief and fleeting, before Will's cheeks burned and he looked back at his music stand.

Now Will wondered why he hadn't listened to Jack speak about the soloist, so he could assign a name to this strangely graceful man. He could ask Alana but there was a limit to how stupid he would appear in front of her.

Soon Will struggled to concentrate on his own playing, his attention drawn time and time again to the mysterious pianist. There was no denying his passion and skill in the solo part. Alana was right about the pianist, he was exceptional.

When the rehearsal was paused for a short break, Will was hoping to catch a glimpse of the pianist up close. He made his way across the stage, but noticed that the man in question was surrounded by admirers. Of course, Will thought, this man had drawn the attention of many others. Still, he continued to near the group, wondering if he should say anything.

The pianist, who had been talking to the concertmistress, seemed to notice Will's approaching. He made eye contact with Will, a knowing glance that caused time to stand still. Will felt a jolt of recognition. It was as if the pianist knew everything from his deepest desires to his greatest fears. The pianist's gaze lingered, a flicker of a smile at the corner of his lips.

Will swallowed, blinked several times, and then averted his gaze to the ground, rushing backstage.

Because Will couldn't stop thinking about that enigmatic pianist and his hands flying across the keys, he ended up sleeping and waking later than normal. Will was not accustomed to waking up late; more often than not he would wake up in the middle of the night and watch the sun rise.

It was nearly noon by the time Will arrived at the music building. No rehearsal, no classes to teach either, so Will was only planning to use the day to practice. But unfortunately, his regular practice room had been taken due to his tardiness.

A pain, but he could bear it. Will walked to the next hall, looking through the thin rectangular windows that lined each door. All of them were lit up and occupied, to the point that Will considered going back home and practicing there. It would certainly put his time to waste, and it was always difficult to play at home. Most of the time his cello would overexcite the dogs.

At the end of the hall Will had seen it. A darkness emanated from the window. Unoccupied, empty. Will breathed a sigh of relief and pushed it open. He set down his cello case, placed his folder on the stand, and then turned on the lights.

It was, in fact, not unoccupied.

Will hadn't been able to discern it in the darkness, but now, with the lights on, he saw a man crouched next to the piano in the practice room. It was the man from last night's dress rehearsal, the piano soloist. Except instead of a tuxedo, it was a three piece suit he donned, in a maroon color with intricate patterns. Will felt underdressed in his simple button up and khaki trousers. This man fit in much more with the style of classical music, with his pleated lines and fitted collars.

Will swallowed slowly and watched, unsure of what to say. Clearly the man had purposely left the lights off, the door ajar and unlocked. Did he intend to draw someone in? Any passerby would think that it's unoccupied.

The other man stood up, one hand on the side of the piano. He did not seem to be surprised. "Hello, Will," he said, as if they had been acquainted with each other for several years. Again, they met eyes.

Will stared at him. He had not been able to tell from the faraway view at yesterday's rehearsal, but his eyes were a marvelous shade of brown. Instead of a proper greeting, Will looked at the ground and muttered, "How... do you know my name?"

"I try to know everyone in the orchestra, yourself included," he explained smoothly, a hint of an accent in his voice. "Hannibal Lecter. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Hannibal took a few steps away from the piano, extending his hand. Will shook it. Hannibal's grip was unsettlingly firm, and Will's hands were embarrassingly clammy. "It is nice to meet you too, um, Mr. Lecter." Somehow, the man seemed too respectable to call by his first name.

"I imagine you want to use this room to practice," said Hannibal, looking pointedly at Will's cello, still in its case.

"I was. But if you're using it, then I can find another room..."

"Nonsense. I am only tuning a few keys on the piano. The humidity last week seems to have affected its pitch. I promise I won't disturb you. Besides," he added, "I'm quite certain there aren't any more available practice rooms."

Will looked at his case and his folder on the stand. It seemed a bit awkward to practice in another's presence, especially personal repertoire. But it wasn't like Hannibal could critique his technique or bowing choice, since he didn't play cello himself, let alone any stringed instrument.

Although appearing like a terribly orchestrated plan on Hannibal's part, Will was interested in his intent. And there really weren't any rooms left. "Alright," he conceded.

A hint of a smile crossed Hannibal's lips. "Good."

Chapter 2

Hannibal had stayed silent whilst Will practiced. He had said he was only tuning the piano, but he seemed to be fixated on Will instead. As Will read his sheet music, he could clearly see in his peripheral that Hannibal was watching him. Will was mildly unsettled, but not anxious. If nothing else, Will was confident in his musical abilities; if Hannibal wanted a performance, he could surely deliver. Yet even in the bouts of silence, the pianist wasn't saying anything, and when Will would look in his direction, Hannibal would suddenly turn his interest back toward the piano.

Well then. If Hannibal was going to play hard to get, Will would play... his cello. Which he continued to do. Rather well, he thought. He knew the purpose of practicing was to play the difficult parts, make mistakes, then amend said mistakes, but he could not help himself and played through the easy parts that sounded difficult. Secretly, Will wanted Hannibal to admire his playing and his skills in the cello. He thought about what Hannibal saw in his playing, what emotions or thoughts were stirred within.

An hour later, whilst Will was stretching his left hand and wrist, Hannibal finally broke the silence. "Tell me, Will, do you get emotionally attached to these pieces?"

Will didn't know what to say. It was a thought provoking question. "I like to think so... isn't that the purpose of music?"

"Sometimes it is. Music, like any art, has the power to reveal our deepest selves," said Hannibal. "In other cases it is used to make a statement. That Dvořák concerto you play so well -- it is a clear defiance of Dvořák's initial belief that the cello was unsuited for a concerto." He paused, letting Will soak in his words. "Do you agree with him?"

Will slowly mulled over Hannibal's question. "Playing the cello... is a defiance in itself. A powerful voice in the orchestra, but also a subtle one."

Hannibal's eyes gleamed with fascination. "But when it is alone, with no accompanying voice, what occurs then?"

"It's... vulnerable," said Will, his voice quieter than he realized. Somehow he felt like he had this conversation many times before.

"Ah, vulnerability," Hannibal repeated thoughtfully. His fingers caressed the wooden cover of the piano, practiced, skilled fingers. "Yet in that vulnerability true beauty emerges. When the cello stands alone, stripped of any orchestral companion, there is no coverage of error. No sound except the rawness of the strings."

Will had an almost cynical smile. He didn't know the last time he had such a meaningful conversation. Most of his discussions with his peers involved arguing over editorial editions or dynamic choices. He had talked about emotional connections to pieces before, but it never really extended beyond a class discussion, and it had never reached such an understanding.

Will barely knew this man, yet he comprehended him completely. Was this Hannibal's intent, to merely speak with Will?

"You seem to have a likeness for the cello," Will stated, moving his hand over the polished wood of his own to gesture, "yet you play the piano."

Hannibal looked at where Will's left hand lay, then glanced up at his eyes, returning a more genial smile despite his somewhat penetrating gaze. "I've found that witnessing the vulnerability in the cello is much more pleasant than enacting it myself. The piano... It has a range of notes and range of emotions at my fingertips, yet -- there is a controlled distance with my instrument."

"Control... It's all about control. You... don't want to get too close," Will murmured. "You control the keys, the keys control the hammers, the hammers control the strings, the strings release the sound."

"You perceive it quite accurately," Hannibal remarked. "Do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Do you always read between the lines so precisely? See beyond the surface?"

Will gave a small shrug. "I suppose it is a bit of a habit. Actually... when I hear people play, I've always found it awfully telling of their own emotional state. Sometimes it's really nice, but sometimes it makes me realize that some musicians don't emotionally invest themselves in their music the same way others do."

"That is quite the rare trait you possess there," Hannibal responded, captivated by Will's explanation.

"Yeah, I guess. But I don't think it's of any use."

"It is rather fascinating."

"I guess," Will said again. "Sometimes I wish I could just enjoy the music without analyzing it to the core, though."

"Perhaps this may seem presumptuous of me," Hannibal began, "but if you could indulge my curiosity that would be kind. What did you notice when you heard my own playing, last night?"

"Cathartic," Will blurted, almost immediately. "You spilled all your feelings onto the instrument. Some kind of... emotional release. In every phrase, in every pause, every subtle crescendo. You let the weight of your thumb play a bigger role than it should have. Those bottom notes in your scales and arpeggios were louder as a result. As if you were trying to rid yourself of something. I've... never witnessed such rawness in a performance."

Hannibal's eyes crinkled a bit as he smiled. "You've seen right through me."

"Sorry. I know it seems intrusive."

"No need to apologize. All art, not just music, can be intrusive. In the intrusion comes some degree of intimacy."

While Will considered their conversation in the back of his mind, Hannibal let him practice a bit more. Will had been practicing a few lines at a time of the Dvořák Cello Concerto. Auditions for the soloist of that piece were in several months, and Will was adamant on getting it. At one point, he decided to play the entire first movement start to end. Hannibal watched him with a nearly reverent look in his eyes, enraptured in the way Will was enraptured in his instrument.

Another short break from playing, and Hannibal posed another set of questions. "Tell me: when you play, Will, do you ever feel possessed by the piece that you are playing? That the music is playing you instead? Does the music become an extension of you, or do you become an extension of the music?" His tone was low, almost as quiet as Will had been, and awfully hypnotic.

Will's breath caught in his throat. Hannibal had voiced thoughts that Will didn't even know he had, described experiences that Will didn't know how to describe. He had often felt exactly the way Hannibal explained, that he was a conduit of music itself, and could get lost in the notes. Will wondered if Hannibal had ever felt like that. If only he could listen to Hannibal play something, he could confirm his thoughts.

"Yes," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "I become an extension of the music. That's... how I felt just now."

Hannibal smiled, like he was only confirming something he already knew, like he had seen that when he had watched Will play. He then glanced at the clock against the wall. It was nearly noon. "Will, as much as I would like to stay, I normally have lunch at this hour. Would you care to accompany me?"

"Yes." The words were out of Will's mouth before he registered what Hannibal said. He stood up suddenly, as if eager to leave. Will hardly cared about the man's intent at this point. Pure interest guided his actions now.

"Your cello," Hannibal pointed out, "should likely remain here, in its case. It would be a shame if it fell out of tune overheating in my car."

My car. His car. Hannibal was offering to drive him, Will realized. "Oh," he breathed, "right." He put his folder of music in the case's pocket, then put his cello in and latched it up. Throughout this process Hannibal stood behind Will, closer than Will would have expected. Despite packing his instrument up over a hundred times before, he felt nervous doing it with Hannibal's critical eyes on him. Leaving his cello case behind the piano so it was out of the way, Will turned off the lights and followed Hannibal out of the room and out of the building.

He tried not to let his jaw drop when he saw Hannibal's Bentley parked, in fact, right next to his own, now meager looking, Volvo. If the suit didn't scream classy and rich, the car surely did. Members of the Baltimore Symphony weren't known to have that kind of money. Will wondered if Hannibal had another profession he hadn't told him about. Teaching private

lessons were common amongst orchestra members, or maybe he taught music classes like Will did at the university. Hannibal did, at the very least, have the wardrobe of an academic.

Only after Hannibal started the car and began to drive did Will think to ask, "Which restaurant did you have in mind?" Hopefully not something too fancy, Will hoped, because he had spent enough money to order new strings for his performance cello.

"Not a restaurant. My own house, in fact," replied Hannibal. "I find that dining in the comfort of one's own space is a more intimate experience, and I don't particularly enjoy the cuisine at restaurants. I'm very cautious of what I put inside me."

Will blinked. "Your house," he repeated, seeming doubtful. There was something clearly calculated about everything Hannibal had said. Was this ruse all just to get Will to come to his house?

"Yes, my house," said Hannibal. "One of my keenest pleasures is having a friend for lunch. I enjoy preparing my own meals for myself and for others."

Hannibal had called him his friend. Will couldn't deny the intrigue. After seeing the man's clothes, car, and clearly sophisticated lifestyle, he figured that his house would be just as exquisite. Will stared out the window, where the buildings of Baltimore whisked by. In the background, Debussy's *Arabesque* played softly, at a slower tempo than Will normally heard in recordings.

"It is my own recording," said Hannibal, noticing Will's attention to the music.

"I can... tell," Will realized. "You play it wonderfully."

"Thank you. Debussy's compositions have an ethereal quality to them that I rarely find in other works. It is a shame he wrote very little for the cello." Hesitating, Hannibal asked, "Do you have any other... thoughts?"

Will laughed. "You really like when I analyze your playing, don't you? Unfortunately, I'd have to see you play it live. A recording never does the true sound justice."

"Quite true," Hannibal agreed. Before he could speak any further on the topic, they had arrived at Hannibal's home. Although Will knew it would be luxurious, he was still taken aback by its grandeur. He felt a mixture of awe and insecurity as he stepped out of the car.

Hannibal led Will through the masterful rooms of his house, eventually stopping at the dining room. Will was in a daze seeing how impressive it all was. "Stay right here, Will," Hannibal requested. "The food will only take a moment to prepare."

Will took a seat at the table absently. There was, somehow, a plate and some silverware already set out for him, as well as for Hannibal, who was to sit at the head of the table, Will presumed. Hannibal had been expecting to dine with another, apparently.

As Hannibal disappeared into the kitchen, Will marveled at the elegance of the room, the enchanting atmosphere of the house. Two candles were lit at the table, an ambience Will was

unaccustomed to. He wondered if Hannibal had planned for Will to join him, since he could clearly tell that the man's intelligence was not to be trifled with. He wondered what would have happened if he declined.

Returning shortly, Hannibal carried a silver tray with a covered dish, disturbing Will's thoughts. "Apologies for the rather simple meal I have prepared." He uncovered the lid with a flourish, revealing a beautifully made... well, Will wasn't completely sure what it was, but it looked fancy. It did not look simple in the slightest. "Risotto, garnished with black truffles. I hope you find it to your liking."

"It looks delicious, Mr. Lecter," Will said, looking amazed.

"Please," said the pianist, "call me Hannibal. We are equals."

"Are we?" Will asked quickly, like he knew what Hannibal was going to say before he had said it.

His two words seemed to hang in the air. Hannibal paused for a moment, his gaze fixed on the cellist, eyes filled with an understanding that went beyond common thought. "Yes, Will," he replied, a sudden tenderness in his voice. "I think you will find that we are more alike than you realize."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I think you will find that we are more alike than you realize."

Will glanced at Hannibal for a long moment, not responding. How could he possibly know so much when they had scarcely gotten to speak with each other? As much as Will wanted to dismiss his words, he sensed the truth that it held. He wondered if Hannibal liked to peer into the depths of other's souls, or if it was just Will.

Slowly, he picked up his fork, fidgeting with it as he weighed Hannibal's statement in his mind. Then he began to eat, interrupting his racing thoughts with the explosion of flavor on his taste buds. It was a complex taste, each nuance equally delicious. Will furrowed his brow as he swallowed and could not help the small sound he made in satisfaction. Next to him, Hannibal, who had been unapologetically watching Will the entire time, started to eat as well, in his own elegant fashion.

"Hannibal," Will started, savoring the food as well as the name on his lips, "you have heard what happened to the previous soloist? The one that you replaced?"

"Unfortunately I have." A flicker of concern passed over his face, but he did not seem mournful in any way. "It is a tragic loss for the orchestra. She was a brilliant musician."

Will, his expression somber, asked, "Did you know her?"

With a subtle shift in his tone, Hannibal explained, "We had... met briefly on a few occasions. She was in a variety of small ensembles so I saw some of her performances. But aside from that, our connection was tenuous at best."

"I didn't know her at all. Actually... I hadn't even heard of her death until yesterday's rehearsal, when Alana mentioned it," Will admitted.

"Miss Bloom, yes," noted Hannibal. "It is not being heavily covered on the news, so your lack of knowledge is understandable."

Of course he would know Alana too, Will thought. "Speaking of yesterday... you played wonderfully. Is this your first time playing that piece?"

Hannibal nodded. "I am glad the opportunity arose. Normally I play works from the Baroque era. But Tchaikovsky is a marvel, in its own manner."

"Alana said you played harpsichord as well."

"Ah, yes," Hannibal smiled. "She knows more than I thought. Yes, I suppose the harpsichord plays a part in what pieces I play. Bach never intended for his pieces to be played on a piano,

after all. But, for the sake of the modern orchestra, piano occupies my realm of musical expertise as well."

It was clear Hannibal enjoyed the harpsichord more, but Will remained unconvinced. "But you get no dynamic contrast with the harpsichord. Are you really okay with that? Doesn't it limit your ability to convey emotions through the music?"

"On the contrary. I can always express myself in different ways through the instrument. Phrasing, breaths, *rubato*, well -- I am sure you know. I find the lack of dynamic range a fascinating thing to work with. With the piano, the soft notes may get lost in the music. With the harpsichord, however, each note has equal clarity among the rest."

Will shrugged. "Either way, you sounded more put together than the cello section did," He then attempted to laugh, but it sounded more like a impatient sigh.

Chuckling lightly, Hannibal said, "Is that so? Perhaps if Miss Lounds was a more agreeable section leader that would not be the case."

This man really did know everyone in the orchestra. Still, everyone he had mentioned had all sat front row, so it wasn't too surprising to Will. "Freddie's... alright," he said.

"You and Miss Lounds are not as well acquainted as two stand partners should be," Hannibal noted.

"We don't really get along. She thinks I'm weird and likes to piss me off... and I think I'd make a better section leader. I don't know how she even got to be first chair. She's mainly a journalist."

"A journalist? What does she write?" Hannibal wondered aloud.

"Something about crime, blah blah blah," Will answered, trying not to scoff. "It is so obviously a tabloid, all gossip and no facts. I… hear it in her playing. I went to one of her recitals, out of courtesy. Rather than a connection to the pieces she played, I only hear her avid devotion to her tabloid."

Hannibal looked at him, a silent usher to go on.

"Take her left hand, for example. Her posture concerning her left hand is... awkward, to say the least. She doesn't put her thumb on the neck of the cello, in its proper spot. She presses her fingers on the strings like she is typing about the latest criminal, not like she is playing a Popper etude."

Will's comprehensive analysis had been so captivating to Hannibal that the latter had stopped eating. After a pause, he eventually said, "To have someone leading a section, but not play with conviction, is a shame. I didn't consider the fact -- with most of the string sections, you must compete with your peers for your desired position in the orchestra."

"It is an experience unique to the strings, yes."

"Tell me, Will, why do you desire the role of section leader? What do you have that Freddie does not?"

Will hesitated for a moment. "I suppose I want to have a more significant impact... make our section sound more cohesive and expressive. As for Freddie... I think I am more devoted in my playing."

"A noble aspiration. I have no doubt that you possess the qualities necessary to excel in such a role."

The pianist seemed to be genuinely supportive. "I... appreciate your confidence in me," Will said sincerely.

As they continued their meal, their conversation meandered through various topics. Will learned about Hannibal's harpsichord compositions, and Hannibal learned about Will's dogs. Soon, Hannibal brought out dessert and described the food in an illustrative light. "Raspberry mille-feuille. I most thoroughly enjoy the intertwining of the layers of sweetness and tartness, much like the interplay of the instruments in an orchestra. Its initial purpose was for a dinner I am hosting tomorrow, but I suppose we can indulge a little early."

Will let Hannibal portion some of the dessert on his plate. "Hosting?" he repeated.

"As I have said, I enjoy making meals for both myself and others. You are, of course, invited."

"Oh, I --" Will laughed awkwardly. "You shouldn't, I don't really -- Well, I wouldn't really know anyone."

"Nonsense," Hannibal replied simply. "I've already invited several of your orchestra peers. I'm sure you know Miss Du Maurier, our wonderful concertmistress, as well as Miss Bloom."

"Alana will be there?"

"Yes, she expressed some enthusiasm at my invitation. I thought it would be a pleasant opportunity to connect outside of the confines of the concert hall."

"I'll... consider it," Will eventually said after a long hesitation. "I am interested in seeing what else you've cooked for such an occasion."

"It will be delicious, I assure you," Hannibal agreed. From his pocket he pulled out a small slip of paper with the details and handed it to Will. "Again, apologies for the simplicity of today's meal."

"If this is simple..." Will muttered with a laugh.

They later finished dessert, Will's mind wandering throughout the duration. He only had some afternoon classes to teach at the music school, so he would be free to attend the dinner party. And he did want to speak to Hannibal more, though the formality of a party seemed to prevent the prospect of a more intimate conversation. They couldn't speak in the way they

had today. Alana would be there as well... so if all went wrong, Will could at least speak with her. Hannibal's invitation was fairly persuasive, he admitted to himself.

Hannibal began to clean the table, and stated, "Unfortunately you cannot stay for much longer, Will. I have an appointment in about half an hour, and I will have to drive to my office."

Fairly intrigued, Will asked, "You teach private lessons?"

"No," replied Hannibal, hastily standing up. "Therapy, in fact. I specialize in music therapy."

"Therapy..." Will looked confused. Being a therapist seemed like a demanding profession, and along with soloing with a symphony orchestra, it was downright impressive. Not to mention the man's culinary skills. Will wondered what other stately talents this Hannibal was hiding. "...Should I have been calling you Dr. Lecter?"

"That is my formal title," Hannibal admitted, a bit sheepishly, "but it is as I said. We are equals."

Why he would play in the orchestra, Will had no clue. Hannibal seemed to have an occupation that was taxing enough. Pure enjoyment was the likely reason, Will gathered. "Alright," he said. "I guess I'll... get an Uber..." He stood up.

"Please, Will, allow me to take you," Hannibal said. "My office is in the music building so I need to drive there as well. No need to worry yourself in someone else's car."

Will would have declined if he hadn't already learned the difficulty in declining Hannibal. Instead, he found himself nodding in agreement. "Okay. Lead the way."

The ride was comfortably quiet, the only sound being an opera piece Will was unfamiliar with playing in the background. In the silence, Will studied Hannibal's profile, the way his eyes crinkled at the sides, his confident hand upon the steering wheel, the fine seams of his suit shifting as he would move his foot from gas to brake. There was an effortless magnetism in his every movement.

Hannibal dropped Will by the music building, their eyes locking momentarily. "Thank you for the ride... I appreciate it," said Will.

Smiling, Hannibal responded. "It was my pleasure."

For some reason Will felt as if there was something more to say, but he couldn't figure what. "I'll see you soon, at least at rehearsal if not tomorrow."

"Of course. Until again, Will."

Chapter End Notes

I think I will change posting schedule to every day actually, since I didn't realize I had made each chapter pretty short. Hope you're enjoying so far!

Chapter 4

The next day, Will was nearly shaking every time he thought of Hannibal's dinner party. When he had told Hannibal he was going to "consider it" his only thought had been on the factor of people he did not know, socialization, the usual things Will disliked. However, as he lectured to some students about how Beethoven transitioned the Classical era to the Romantic one, it had suddenly popped in his mind that he would have to wear something formal to the occasion.

This small problem caused Will immeasurable anxiety. Hannibal already wore suits on the daily, so what "formal" was to him escaped Will. Not to mention Hannibal would probably faint if he saw Will's wardrobe. Besides the tuxedo for concerts, his only attire that could be considered formal was a lonely blazer jacket and some fitted dress pants. Will was not even sure if he owned a necktie.

After his class, as Will furiously typed in the search engine "what to wear to dinener party male," typo included, Alana walked in.

"So," she began, seeming amused, "seems like you're going to Dr. Lecter's dinner party."

"How did you know?" Will asked, his eyes darting up.

"Your laptop is still connected to the projector." She nodded to the projector screen behind Will, which indeed was broadcasting his scrolling through various suits.

"Oh," he said. "Well... I'm still not completely sure. I don't really go to these fancy shmancy events. And -- well, you can see I don't have anything to wear."

"You should go," Alana encouraged. "And, I've been looking for an excuse to buy a new dress. We can go shopping."

Will hesitated for a moment, but decided that Alana had better fashion sense than he did and it would be best to agree.

After a bit of shopping Alana had settled on a sleek black dress, and Will had settled on a midnight blue suit. The crisp white shirt and patterned silk tie that accompanied the look made Will feel more confident than he'd like to admit. Maybe this was why Hannibal wore suits all the time.

He tried not to think about the price, and Alana advised him as such. Hopefully Hannibal's party would feed Will enough that he wouldn't have to worry about food for the next several days or something.

"I never thought I would say this, but I am actually looking forward to the dinner party now," Will said with slight amazement. "I don't know if you've heard... but Hannibal is an exquisite cook."

"First name basis, huh?" Alana chuckled.

"Oh, yeah..." Will thought about telling her about his eventful time with Hannibal the previous day, but didn't even know how to start. "I went to his house yesterday, too. He gave me a bit of a sample of his cooking. I'm sure today's dinner will be even more tasteful."

"Wow, that is impressive. It's hard to catch Dr. Lecter's eye."

"Do you think so?" It had seemed a little too easy to Will. He had barely done anything and Hannibal had invited him to his home, his life.

"I've just noticed... he seems to have a lot of connections but they're not very close ones," Alana explained. "So for you to say you've been to his house already, outside of a social gathering... It's a bit shocking."

Will thought back to what Hannibal said about his playing the piano. *There is a controlled distance with my instrument*, Hannibal had said. *You don't want to get too close*, Will had responded.

Alana noticed Will considering her words, and continued, "It's only what I've heard, of course. I'm sure you'll learn more about him this evening."

Will did, in fact, learn much more that evening.

Hannibal opened the door for him when Will arrived. Immediately Hannibal's expression brightened, even in that eloquently subtle manner of his. "I'm so glad you could make it, Will. Please, come in."

He managed to smile politely enough and stepped inside. He could feel Hannibal's intense gaze on him even though his own eyes were turned to the carpet. Appraising the formal wear, Will gathered.

"I am pleased by what you've chosen to wear," Hannibal began as he scrutinized Will from head to toe. "It suits you."

Will opened his mouth to thank him, but something in his brain short-circuited when Hannibal reached his hand out and let his fingers graze the lapel of Will's suit jacket. Instead, a shaky sigh left Will's mouth. He glanced at Hannibal's hand upon his jacket, and thought about its skill on the piano.

"A tailored slim-fit," Hannibal noted. "The deep blue hue matches your eyes quite well."

Alana had said the same thing, actually, and it was what prompted Will to pick the color in the first place. But when Hannibal had said it, it caused a hitch in Will's breathing. The pianist continued to study him with an intensity that sent a shiver down his spine. What had Will thought yesterday...? Lack of intimate conversations because it was a dinner party? He could hardly remember now -- most of his thoughts had left him the second Hannibal's thumb traced the seams of his jacket.

Will assumed that Hannibal had concluded his extended compliment, but instead he leaned very close to the cloth of Will's jacket. Will tried not to think about how Hannibal's head was basically resting on his chest. He had never gotten a view of his hair like this, a top view, and peered down questioningly. Will wondered what Hannibal would do if he put a hand in his hair. It would be quite easy, considering that Hannibal had literally stooped down to below Will's level.

Before Will could actually act on his thoughts, or even measure the consequences of acting on his thoughts, Hannibal inhaled deeply, through his nose, which had nearly embedded itself under Will's suit jacket. "Did you just... smell me?" Will blurted.

Straightening back up, Hannibal gave Will a kind, but not guilty, smile, as if this was the most normal thing to happen at dinner parties. "Difficult to avoid. There was a subtle hint of freshness that still lingers in the fabric. A new addition to your wardrobe, acquired today, perhaps? And I recognize the make... it is the tailor on Sycamore Street, no?"

Will's brows raised in astonishment, a mixture of awe and apprehension. "Yes... to both," he eventually managed, at a loss.

"That tailor is the only one I know of that can alter a jacket in a matter of hours. Very useful for last minute needs," Hannibal commented. "I do have a liking for this fabric especially. It is an excellent choice." As Hannibal said this, he ran his hands down Will's shoulders and arms, very slowly, savoring the texture of the fabric the way he savored his food.

"Alana did... help me," Will stammered, finding natural speech a bit difficult at the moment.

"Unfortunately, Miss Bloom has not arrived yet," said Hannibal. "On that note, I should let you speak to some of the other guests. I'll leave you be, if only for a moment."

Will did not really want to talk to some of the other guests. He was already regarded as an oddity in the orchestra by some, and though there were also those that respected him and his talent on the cello, Will did not want to risk the chance of embarrassing himself. Besides, no one else seemed as fascinating as Hannibal was. None of them could hold conversations like the ones Will and Hannibal shared.

As Hannibal left to venture into another room, Will saw someone in the corner of the room that had been watching their interaction. Bedelia Du Maurier, concertmistress of the Baltimore Symphony, had been looking at them the entire time, sniffing and all.

Without a word, she began to approach him. "Hannibal," she stated, "seems to have quite the affinity for you."

First name basis as well, Will noticed. "Is... that a problem?" he asked, perplexed.

Her next words were spoken slowly and deliberately. "Will Graham, you are but a moth fluttering towards a flame. Hannibal Lecter has a symphony of complexities within him."

Will's mind raced, not sure how to consider Bedelia's words. He did not know if she was stating her dislike toward him or something else altogether. Will had seen Bedelia and

Hannibal speak with each other often, during rehearsal, during breaks, and the like, so he did not think there was any animosity between the two. "Why... are you sharing this with me?"

A hint of melancholy touched the concertmistress's eyes. "Because, Will, I have seen the echoes of his symphony before. I want to spare you his haunting melody."

Her words were puzzling. Will wanted to ask more, but before he knew it Hannibal had returned. "Will, I see you've met Miss Du Maurier. I have brought some drinks."

Will glanced behind him to see Hannibal standing there, two wine glasses filled with dark red wine in each of his hands. "Yes, she is..." He paused, trying to think of how a normal guest would talk, "a wonderful concertmistress, as you must know."

"Indeed she is," Hannibal said, politely smiling at Bedelia.

For some reason Will thought she would respond unkindly, but she only thanked him. "You flatter me. The whole orchestra is aware that you are the soul of the Tchaikovsky."

"Only because it was written as such," Hannibal replied.

"Tchaikovsky's work merely provided the canvas, but it is the musicians who breathe life into the notes," Bedelia asserted.

They continued on that tangent, vaguely reminiscent of Hannibal's words to Will in the practice room, a metaphorical discussion of music. Yet he sensed a certain detachment in Hannibal's words. Hannibal kept glancing at Will and not Bedelia as he spoke, as if the words weren't addressed to her.

Will was saved from their philosophical dissertations when the doorbell rang and Hannibal answered the door. Will was happy to see that it was Alana that came in. "Hello, Miss Bloom," Hannibal greeted.

"Dr. Lecter, your house is magnificent," Alana told him, the awe in her eyes similar to Will's from the previous day.

The rest of the night went about as Will expected. Yet Bedelia's words hung in the recesses of his mind. Will had sensed something different about Hannibal, that was certain. But he had never contemplated that this difference was a negative one. Hannibal's passing interactions with the other guests allowed a better view for Will to understand him. With what Bedelia said in his mind, it was clear that Hannibal's words and gestures were an elaborate symphony of control and manipulation.

Will knew that he too, was being manipulated, of course, even before Bedelia had said anything. The signs were telling. Hannibal's controlled distance had ceded when it came to Will. The glances at rehearsal, the practice room, the invitation to lunch, to the dinner party, the appraisal of his outfit -- how cleverly planned the whole endeavor was! And in merely three days as well! Will almost wanted to congratulate Hannibal on his admirable effort.

But as much thinking as he could do, Will had no idea why Hannibal was doing all this. Why did Hannibal want Will under his hand of control? The actions seemed telling, but the manner Hannibal executed them seemed genuine. Will had always been able to discern the sincerity of others, and Hannibal had been sincere. He was truly impressed with Will's choice in clothing, and he had truly appreciated their conversation together. Omission of the truth was the only thing Will could think of.

Will took a deep breath, not bothering to touch his food as he dwelled on the matter.

In all honesty, he knew he would have to consider this sooner or later, but Hannibal was such an interesting person that Will did not want to mull over his ulterior motives. First of all, if omission of the truth was what Hannibal was employing, that meant he was hiding something, something of great importance. The man before him, with his impeccable manners and sophisticated charm, seemed too perfect to be entirely genuine. Second, Hannibal wanted something from Will, but what exactly, Will had no idea. He did not know what he had to give Hannibal. He did not know what the man wanted either.

As the evening wore on, Will couldn't shake off the unsettling feeling that something was amiss. Hannibal's attention still seemed to be primarily focused on Will, as if the rest of the guests were merely pawns, and Will was the king that had to be captured. Torn between Hannibal's allure and his unease about his intentions, Will decided it was best to leave Hannibal's home and return to his own familiar surroundings.

Will at least finished the bit of food on his plate, first -- he did not want to seem rude -- then disposed of it accordingly and eventually made his way to the front door. Hannibal was nowhere to be seen, which was good, as Will did not want to bother explaining his reason for leaving early.

Just as Will opened the creaking door, unfortunately, Hannibal appeared behind him. "Leaving so soon?" he questioned, disappointment in his voice.

Will froze. "Yes, I don't feel well, a bit feverish," he muttered.

“Do you?” Hannibal asked rhetorically, more to himself than to Will. Will nearly jumped when a cool, precise, hand touched his forehead. “Your temperature seems normal, but you are sweating profusely. Is it the crowd that makes you anxious?”

“Yeah… Sorry about… this,” Will lied, acting more flustered than he was. His hand was now trembling over Hannibal’s ornate doorknob, adding to the feigned anxiety.

"Such a shame. I was just about to serve dessert. I suppose it is good that you already had a taste of it yesterday." Hannibal paused, observing Will. "It appears you may struggle with social anxiety disorder. If you're open to it, my therapy could be beneficial for you."

"I'll consider it," Will said, then regretted his answer, because the last time he had said that, it was in regards to this dinner party. He didn't want his reply to morph into an affirmation for a second time. "It was nice seeing you, Hannibal."

When Hannibal spoke, it was with a tone of resignation. "Take care, Will."

Chapter 5

At the next rehearsal, Will tried to ignore Hannibal, who was marking his sheet music with the occasional glance in Will's direction. Instead, he found himself actually engaging in conversation with Freddie Lounds. It was a miracle, Alana would say later.

The topic of the tragic murder of the previous soloist came up in conversation, and while Will knew Freddie was a journalist, he never thought to ask her about the crime. "Don't you have... I don't know, an inside view of the case?"

"Afraid the police are on your trail?" Freddie replied, teasing.

Will frowned. "Very funny." Unclenching his jaw, he continued, "I was just curious."

"Well, it is a curious case, you know. The police have no leads, and it's all very hush-hush. But... I'll get to the bottom of it. I have my sources."

Will knew Freddie's "sources" were less than ethical. "Sure," he said, sardonically.

"I think it's someone in the orchestra," Freddie proclaimed.

"I highly doubt that," Will said.

"Although..." Freddie seemed to consider something, and even placed her bow on the stand, "the police think it's someone with a surgical background, based on how she was cut."

"Cut?" Will repeated, concerned.

"Yes, it was pretty gruesome. But it did make for a great story. Honestly, just go to Tattlecrime dot com and you can see for yourself. You should see the pictures of the body. She was found inside her piano."

Will knew she was only trying to interest him further, but his eyes widened anyway. "Inside... with the lid closed?"

Freddie nodded. "Since I've answered all your questions, it's only fair that I ask you some in return. When'd you and Dr. Lecter get so chummy?"

Flushing slightly, Will said, "What? We're just colleagues."

"I see the way he looks at you at rehearsal. See, he's even looking at you right now, from across the piano."

Will did not bother to turn his head to see for himself because he knew Freddie was right. "I really... don't want to discuss this with you."

"So there is something to discuss," Freddie said, grinning at Will's discomfort. "He even went to your spring recital, you know."

Will did not know. "What?" Freddie had attended Will's spring recital, just as Will did hers, out of politeness. He had no idea that Hannibal had as well. The spring recital -- that had been before he'd even truly met Hannibal, before the piano soloist was even killed. Why would Hannibal, an accomplished pianist, bother attending the recital of an orchestra member he barely knew?

"He sat in front of me." She shrugged. "Seems like more than colleague behavior. It would make for an interesting story."

"No, it wouldn't," Will insisted. "It's not what you think."

"Whatever you say. I've written tons of articles about dating within the orchestra. Normally it doesn't work out. But... if you ever want an interview..."

"*No*, Freddie." Will started to play the beginning of the piece on his stand, just so Freddie would shut up.

The soloist's address hadn't been difficult to find. Will casually stepped over the yellow DO NOT CROSS tape that bordered the building. It was deserted, for the time being at least.

The smell of dried blood washed into the air. Clearly, her home was still being investigated, even though a week had passed since her body was found. Will had done some additional research in his free time. Freddie had put the picture of the late pianist's house in her article. Her body had been in the piano for over a week in itself before anyone found her. Still, seeing the real scene was a more intimate experience than the sensationalized photos on Tattlecrime.

There was the piano, grand and sophisticated. Fit for a professional. After a minute or so of feeling the polished wood, Will took a deep breath and lifted the lid of the piano and propped it up. The body had been removed, of course, but the smell was permeating. Will wrinkled his nose. There was still blood on the strings inside.

With the lid open, Will slowly sat on the bench. Even the slightest creak of the wood had his hairs stand on end. He played a few notes on the piano. Completely out of tune, as he expected. There were really two murders here -- the soloist and the instrument. No one would bother to fix the piano now.

As Will examined the scene, he thought back to the last time the piano had been played. She had been practicing. The pages of the Tchaikovsky concerto -- *she was supposed to play it*, Will thought with sudden fury -- rested on the piano.

"I enter her house. The doorknob was not difficult to break. She lives secluded, by herself. There are no neighbors accidentally witnessing what I am about to do. She barely notices my entering. She is playing the arpeggios with perfect precision, fully focused on the piece. Her playing... I look at her fingers. They are calm, cool, utterly at ease. I let her finish the second movement. But she won't get to finish the third," Will murmured to himself, a whisper in the empty room.

"She doesn't see me, she doesn't hear me. I stand behind her while she is engrossed in the music. The knife pierces through her neck. She doesn't have time to react, only lets out a strangled gasp." Will looked at the keys of the piano, the arc of dried blood on them. "Her beautiful melody, tainted, by her death. I then cut her, methodically, and lodge each piece of her between the strings. I cut her heart out and close the lid of the piano. I place the heart on top of it."

Will was sweating when his imagination releases him from its hold. He closes the lid of the piano. There is dried blood on it, where the heart had been. The soloist had become a part of her instrument, in all senses of the word. Nonetheless, her heart eluded it.

The next time Will visited her house it was nearly unintentional. He had noticed it when he was driving and before he knew it he had parked in the driveway and was walking toward it.

He didn't look too closely at the piano this time -- it had received enough inspection on his first visit. Instead, Will looked at the modestly furnished house. She lived alone, was only a soloist and ensemble player. He peered through her music, which lay on a table beside her piano. A taste for Schumann, with the occasional Chopin nocturne lodged in the stack. On the top, however, was Franz Liszt's *La Campanella*. He sat on the piano bench as he flipped through the sheet music, and leaned back against the keys of the forgone piano. It made a sound.

Will hesitated and sat back up. The sound stopped. He let his elbow rest on the keys. It sounded normal to his ears. A little more than normal, in fact.

Slowly and with shaking fingers, Will played a C major scale with his left hand. It was in tune, perfectly in tune. Will played it again, certain that his ears were betraying him. They weren't. Sometime between three days ago (Will's first visit) and today, the piano must have been tuned.

Perhaps it was to be sold? But Will could still see the blood, the remnants of evidence on the instrument. Undoubtedly cleaning the piano should have happened before anything else if that was the case.

"*I am only tuning a few keys on the piano*." Will gasped as the words replayed in his mind. Hannibal was perfectly capable of tuning the piano, he thought. Could it be that Hannibal had been to her house before him?

The image of Hannibal intricately tuning the piano, just as he had in the practice room, appeared in Will's mind. It was certainly possible, but it could just be an overactive imagination playing him, Will thought. But piano technicians were few and far between. It was a rarity for a concert pianist like Hannibal to know how to tune the instrument as well, since the process was intricately complicated. Will knew of no other that could have tuned it.

Only one thought ran through Will's mind. He had to tell Freddie. Will's heart pounded in his chest as he contemplated whether to share his suspicions with Freddie. On one hand, he didn't

want to involve her in something that could be purely coincidental. But at the same time, maybe Freddie could give more context into why the piano was tuned in the first place.

Calling Freddie led to no one picking up. Will sighed and watched his phone go to voicemail. He supposed she would probably be in the music building already. There was to be a rehearsal that evening -- the last one before the concert. Will would be three hours early, but that was hardly a problem.

His search turned out to be fruitless. Freddie was obviously absent and hadn't arrived at the building yet. Even through the practice room windows, Will could see a distinct lack of curly red hair.

Sighing, Will found his usual practice room, checked to make sure it was Hannibal-free, and closed and locked it, gathering his thoughts. Someone, for some reason, had tuned the piano in the murdered soloist's house. Was it so that Will would find it? Was his sneaky trespassing not so sneaky? He didn't leave behind anything on his first visit, nothing that could be identifiable to him at least.

Will continued to contemplate all these factors, and thought about Hannibal. While it may be true he could tune the piano, Will acknowledged that didn't mean he had anything to do with the murder. Will himself was trespassing, only out of curiosity, it wasn't impossible that Hannibal had done the same. Perhaps he had been overthinking his initial assumption. Hannibal and Will were rather alike. Will had been so disappointed to see the instrument's treatment the first time he visited the crime scene. Hannibal must have felt the same way.

But was it that they truly were alike or that Hannibal had imprinted the idea in Will's mind? "*We are equals*," he had put so eloquently, more than once. Again, Will didn't know what to believe.

Slowly, he began to unlatch his cello case, hoping to at least get a few hours of practicing if nothing else. With a nearly unconscious motion, Will started to unlatch the velcro straps that held his cello in place until he realized he was gripping at something that was not there.

Will turned his head to look in the cello case. It was empty.

Stunned for a few moments, Will laughed. Then laughed again, wryly. He had never been this absurd, this inane, to forget his cello and only bring his case. He wondered if he should follow Hannibal up on that therapy offer, because he must be losing his mind to do such a thing. Will knew his hard case was quite heavy (he didn't feel like paying extra for the lighter ones) but surely he should have noticed the weight difference when his cello wasn't inside.

It was good that he had arrived at rehearsal early, Will thought, trying to stay optimistic. He closed his case, brought it out to his car, and then drove home. Then he checked the time. He would still be half an hour early if he came back as soon as he got home. And if worst came to worst he could play one of the school cellos, notorious for their lack of tone quality. Will frowned to himself as he thought about how there hadn't been any bow hair on one of the school cello bows.

But his cello wasn't at his house, either. No, Will wasn't losing his mind. He took a deep breath. Someone must have taken it. Which Will thought was rather stupid considering whoever took his cello didn't take the case with it. But still, awful news. Will didn't want to say aloud the amount of money he had spent on the instrument.

As for the rehearsal tonight, Will supposed he would have to go the school cello route. There goes any chance of sounding decent, he thought. He drove back to the music building, feeling foolish for wasting his time.

On his way, he got a call from Alana. "Hello?"

"Will, did you see Crawford's email? He's canceled rehearsal." Her tone seemed hurried.

For a moment, Will was furious. He felt like he had been driving all over the place and to learn it was for naught was frustrating. "Of course he would, he just *loves* his last-minute changes," Will scoffed, clearly annoyed.

"No -- don't... don't say that." Alana's voice broke.

Will hesitated, then asked, "Has something happened?" He stopped at a traffic light, wondering whether to turn back and go home.

"It's your stand partner, Freddie..." Alana's voice broke off again. "She's been murdered."

Will said nothing for a long moment, only stumbling out of his shock when the car behind him honked, for the traffic light had turned green. He couldn't believe he had been worrying about his cello while something so tragic had happened. He noticed Freddie's absence but had never thought about why she hadn't been absent. "Was... it in the music building? Should I go and see?"

"Will... they think it's you," Alana said, her voice shaky.

"What?" Will exclaimed. "I wasn't --"

"Her body was found inside a cello... Your cello."

Will stood, aghast, backstage in the concert hall. The familiar DO NOT CROSS tape was sectioned around the stage. From the distance Freddie's bright hair was unmistakable. Her body, contorted and trapped in the hollowed body of Will's cello, was grotesque. All her limbs had been amputated, in order for her to fit. The front of the cello had been cleverly removed so that all could see her lifeless form. Through her throat was Will's bow, the hair disconnected and hanging limp from the frog of the bow. Blood trailed from her neck and stained the yellow blouse she wore.

From his spot behind the curtains, Will peered at the numerous police officers examining the crime scene, collecting evidence. As the pendulum swung, Will imagined how it had all occurred.

"It's the same person who killed the pianist," Will suddenly asserted.

"Really?" said Alana, who was next to him. Although the cello did belong to Will, Alana instantly believed him when he had explained over the phone how the cello hadn't been in his case. She had agreed to show him what had happened, to sate Will's own morbid curiosity.

"Yeah... Freddie was getting dirt on that case, after all. She probably got too close," Will said shakily. Her body had been in an instrument as well, he wanted to add, but didn't.

"I'm so sorry, Will... this is terrible," Alana said softly.

"Who found the body?"

"Crawford did. He's furious, as you probably figured. Furious at you especially." Alana hesitated, debating her next words. "The whole orchestra knows... you and Freddie didn't really get along. There are multiple witnesses testifying that you went into the building three hours prior to rehearsal."

Will groaned. "No one saw me *leave* half an hour later? I have nothing to do with all this."

"Even if they did, they think you could have still set it up. I'm so sorry." Alana placed a reassuring hand on Will's shoulder despite her discouraging words.

He didn't respond for a long moment, instead watching the police. "Did they... find her limbs?" Will winced at how odd it felt to ask such a question, to be in such a situation.

"I heard them say... the culprit took them... It's so messed up," Alana replied, a look of consternation on her face.

"That's one thing they won't find on me, at least," Will muttered. Though Will wondered why the limbs were taken. A trophy, perhaps? Will didn't know. The heart of the pianist had been removed, but that had been for a metaphorical reason.

And Will's cello, when had that been taken? Slowly, Will replayed the events of the day. His cello was at home, then he had latched it in his case, then he had driven... to the late pianist's home. There he was for a half hour or so. After that, Will had gone back to the car, drove to the music building, brought his case inside, opened it, saw his cello missing, went home, saw his cello wasn't there either, then went back to the building, where Freddie had been killed.

It must have been during the time he was at the pianist's house. The murderer knew he was there, got into his car, for Will had absently parked it in the driveway. The killer had been ahead of Will, ahead this entire time, and Will couldn't bear it.

Will's next sentence was filled with deliberate pauses and a mixture of emotion. "I need... to see... Dr. Lecter."

Chapter 6

"Hello, Will." Hannibal did not seem visibly phased by the event of Freddie's murder, or by Will's presence. He stood at ease, in the band room, where a couple of police officers had just finished questioning him.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter," Will replied, jaw clenched.

One of the men, in a police uniform, glanced up at Will. "You're Will Graham? We've been looking for you."

"Yeah, well, I live an hour away," Will mumbled.

"Either way, we'll need you to state your full legal name, home address, and relationship with Freddie Lounds."

The initial questioning went on for a while, but Alana seemed to have dramatized Will's suspicion. He was a potential suspect, but he wasn't going to be arrested or anything. For the duration of the questioning, Hannibal lingered in the room. Will felt like Hannibal was smirking at him, but every time Will's eyes wandered in his direction, Hannibal was only looking back with a neutral expression.

"Someone is trying to frame me," Will had tried to explain, to little avail. His words sounded oddly disjointed. The police seemed wary of Will's theory of his instrument being taken, even as he attempted to elaborate.

As Will's questioning continued, the room started to feel hazy, and he struggled to focus on the conversation. Everything seemed to blur together. He wanted to explain how the piano had been tuned, how Freddie's limbs had been clearly cut with a surgical hand. He wanted to explain that the person who had used his delicate bow for such an indelicate purpose had touched the hairs at the bottom, and sent them awry. Will would never hold his own bow in such a manner, he thought to say. Even more so Will wanted to say that the police needed to revisit the pianist's murder, that it was connected to that, that they were both found inside the type of instrument they played, that it was the same person, that it was so obvious, so glaringly *obvious*--

"Will?" Hannibal's voice sounded strangely far away. "Are you alright?"

Despite what Will's ears made it seem, when his vision stopped being splotched with black spots, Will saw that Hannibal was actually very close to him and scrutinizing closely. "You seemed to have suffered from a dissociative episode. Excuse me." He lightly touched Will's jaw, his finger brushing against the bit of stubble there, with the purpose of angling Will so that Hannibal could study his eyes. Will would have relished the gesture more had he not been feeling so... floaty and distant from the world.

"I'm fine," Will said, though his voice seemed raspy and remote. "Just a lapse, I suppose." Amid his strange disconnect from the world, Will was also a bit frustrated. The anxiety at

Hannibal's party had been a ruse. This was not. His mind wasn't supposed to fail him like this.

Hannibal moved his hand away but didn't cease his gaze. "Moments of dissociation can provide valuable insights into the workings of the mind. It's fascinating to witness the mind's ability to protect itself, to detach from reality when faced with overwhelming circumstances."

Will struggled to catch up. "Are the police gone?" he asked, as he looked around the empty room, save himself and Hannibal.

Nodding, Hannibal said, "It seems you've forgotten. They explained how you would have to do a more formal interrogation at another date and will contact you as appropriate."

"How did... How could I have forgotten all that?"

"As I said, you, or rather your mind, detached from reality in an attempt at self-preservation. Perhaps it was to shield you from the accusations and the gruesome reality of Freddie's murder."

"Lost time."

"That is one way to put it, yes."

"But..." Will trailed off for a moment. "I can't -- you still sound so far away. Even right now. So... detached. I feel like I'm imagining you."

Hannibal didn't look unsettled, he in fact had an interested gleam in his eye as Will explained his symptoms. "It's a common sensation during dissociative episodes. Your perception of self becomes fragmented."

He then reached out again, this time placing his hand on Will's shoulder. Will took a deep breath. He felt less detached now.

"You must ground yourself, Will. Freddie was a significant acquaintance of yours. It's perfectly normal that you are so disturbed by it, and that your mind is reacting in this way."

His hand did seem like an anchor, Will thought. Heavy, and comforting, and stopping Will from drifting out to sea. "Is this a therapy session?"

That telltale smile returned. "Did you want it to be?"

Will's lips twitched with a mix of amusement and apprehension. He couldn't deny his curiosity in seeing Hannibal's office. Even in his near stupor, the cogs of Will's mind were buzzing with plans. "I guess it... wouldn't hurt."

"Then we ought to go to my office," Hannibal agreed. "After all, you do not look fit for driving home just yet."

Slowly, Will started to come back to his senses as Hannibal walked him to his office, which was at the other end of the music building.

As they entered the room, it almost seemed like Will had returned to Hannibal's house. Dozens of elaborate decorations were scattered neatly around the room. As Will paced the area, Hannibal stood still, watching him. A shared silence, until Hannibal asked, "Tell me, Will, who do you think killed Freddie?"

"The same person who killed the pianist." Will paused, examining Hannibal's array of instruments that lined one wall. Along with a piano and a harpsichord, there were various others as well. "Didn't expect you to play the theremin. Seemed a little too... contemporary for your taste."

"I do play the theremin," Hannibal affirmed, not bothered by Will's deviation of topic.

"There is a controlled distance with that instrument too. You play it without ever touching it," Will muttered.

Hannibal looked surprised, or at least, his eyebrow raised a millimeter, which was the closest to surprise the man seemed to get. "I suppose so, yes," he replied, ambiguously. "You always seem to see through me, Will."

Ignoring Hannibal's words, Will thought back about the murder. "I think Freddie might have gotten too close. She must have found out something from the killer... some kind of damning evidence that proved the killer's guilt in ending the pianist's life."

"I am surprised that you as a civilian have such a detailed understanding."

"It's nothing, just... my mind takes me to dark places..." Will started. He walked over to a stack of sheet music. Hannibal had a variety of Baroque era composers, as Will might have expected from a harpsichord enthusiast. Bach dominated the stack, along with Handel and Rameau, but there was some Mozart, Haydn, and Wagner in there as well. As Will flipped through the sheet music with his thumb, his mind wandered. He did not know how to divulge something he had never divulged before. "I imagine doing things I'd never actually do. I imagine myself killing others."

"Who?" Hannibal's response was immediate, but in a quiet tone.

"People I know..." Will said, feeling utterly exposed. "You."

"How do you kill me?"

Was this therapy? Will scarcely cared about the ethicality of the moment. "With my hands. Always, with my hands."

He heard a small exhale, and for once, Will noticed, it was Hannibal who had sighed, in some form of relief. Will turned to him and saw a conflicted expression on Hannibal's face. "You've considered it multiple times," Hannibal noted. "Yet you only met me last week."

Will didn't respond for a long moment. He began to pace the room again, like stopping would acknowledge the weight of what he just shared. He circled Hannibal's desk in the center of the office. A lamp accentuated the angles of Will's face. His fingers absently rubbed against

the expensive wood of the table. "I know what I said seems suspicious, but I didn't kill Freddie. Or the pianist."

"I never believed you did."

"But I feel like I did, that I'm... responsible for this, in some way."

"Is it because of your cello?" Hannibal inquired. "The instrument was a part of you, and to see it utilized in such a fashion... it may feel like you are being drawn into the crime as well.

Was. Hannibal considered Will's cello deceased, just like Freddie. Just like Will had considered the piano at the dead soloist's house -- before it had been tuned, of course.

"Or," Hannibal mentioned, "is it because of this imagination of yours?"

"Something like that," Will muttered. "This killer, I -- I see myself in him. A reflection of my darkness."

"We all have a capacity for violence, Will. It is what sets us apart from animals, it is what makes us human. The question is how to confront this capacity."

Will ruminated over Hannibal's words. His fingers, still fidgeting over the desk, touched a black leather notebook. Curious, Will picked it up. Hannibal said nothing, and Will flipped through the pages.

He was disappointed. It was only a list of names and appointment times in neat cursive writing. Nobody he knew personally, of course.

One name did catch his attention, however. "Isn't this... the late pianist?" Will asked.

He turned his gaze towards Hannibal, who was nearly smirking. "Yes," he answered.

"She was your patient." It was no longer a question.

"Yes."

"But you told me that you didn't know her that well."

Hannibal sighed as if Will was missing something. "Nobody truly knows their patients, Will."

"You... lied to me," Will said, slowly.

"You had never asked if she was my patient."

"Would you have said yes if I did?"

Hannibal paused, seriously contemplating the question. "Yes. I think I would."

Feeling uneasy, Will closed the notebook. The question on his mind finally tumbled out. "What are you hiding, Hannibal?"

Instead of replying immediately, he walked toward Will and gently eased the notebook from his hand. "We are all hiding something, Will." He gestured to the two seats a few yards away from the desk. "Why don't you take a seat?"

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> I combined this chapter with what was intended to be the next chapter, so it's a bit longer. Hope you enjoy!

Will hated to admit the "therapy" session worked wonders. It wasn't too different from his other conversations with Hannibal, no, just that Will's mental woes were more... out in the open. He wasn't sure if he was alright with entrusting such things to Hannibal. It was quite clear that Hannibal was hiding something, considering how he had dodged Will's purposely direct question, so Will's unease in that sense still lingered.

Will's house was also searched and he was interrogated formally about Freddie's murder, but the FBI (the case was eventually assigned to them) was unable to come to a conclusion. The knife that her limbs had been cut with matched with nothing that Will owned, and although it was his cello that was used, there was no DNA proof and, altogether, not enough evidence to convict Will of the crime. Alana, thank goodness, testified in Will's favor, for she had heard Will and Freddie's conversations during rehearsal and seen that their animosity had lessened somewhat before her untimely death.

The concert was postponed to the following Saturday. Jack seemed to waste no time despite the unfortunate and sorrowful circumstances.

As for Will's cello, he had not bothered to buy another one. Although he was positive his late cello would get reimbursed in some way, he couldn't bear the thought of visiting a string shop at the moment. Seeing another cello would only serve to remind him of the sorry fate of his own. He canceled his classes for the following week and spent his time in the solace of his home for as long as he could.

A gray Tuesday morning involved a duration of said languishing until his ruminations were interrupted by a beep on his phone.

Will frowned and checked it. It was a text from an unknown number that read:

Hello, is this Will Graham?

After staring at the text for several moments, wondering who could possibly bother to get his number, Will typed:

Yes, who is this

A quick reply followed.

It's Hannibal.

How did you get my number?

I may have asked Miss Bloom for it.

Oh

Will felt that may have been a little too curt, so he added:

Did you want to talk to me about something?

Yes. I was hoping you were doing alright.

I'm fine

I saw your classes were canceled. A shame for your students.

Yeah
I wanted to separate myself from all the stuff going on, at least for a bit
It's an introductory course though
The students will be fine

Will felt awkward, like he was rambling. However, Hannibal did not seem to mind Will's influx of messages.

I am glad you're prioritizing your mental well-being.
If you want to talk or schedule another session, I am here.

Like hell Will would ask for another session. He did not want to stoop so low to ask Hannibal for such a thing. He was embarrassed at how vulnerable he had acted in the aftermath of Freddie's murder, and how Hannibal was able to comfort him and talk him out of his dissociative state. Will couldn't remember the last time he had felt so trusted by another person. Nevertheless, Hannibal still had a carefully concocted mask that Will had not managed to break.

Thanks, but I'm ok

You're welcome, Will. I hope to see you at Friday's rehearsal, at the very least.

Right... the rehearsal that was supposed to occur last Friday had also been rescheduled to the next week, just like the concert.

Don't worry, I'll be there.

Perfect.

Will stared at Hannibal's message, then pocketed his phone.

The day had passed by slowly, and so did the day after that. Will was torn between his regard for Hannibal and his suspicion of him. He wondered what would happen if he texted Hannibal, but could not bring himself to do it.

Wednesday night, however, when Will went to sleep, a gruesome torrent of images flooded his mind.

In his dream, he and Hannibal were playing their respective instruments, but they were the instruments involved in the murders. Will looked at Hannibal, who donned the same tuxedo that he had the first time they met -- blood red pocket square and all. This time, the pianist's body was still lodged between the strings under the lid. The heart, which should have been on the lid, had been moved to rest on the strings of the inside of the piano, directly under the small hammers. Yet the piano produced a beautiful sound, as if her death had fixed the instrument, amended it of all its imperfections. The late pianist's heart was slowly being crushed by the hammers as Hannibal slammed his deft hands on the keys. Will watched Hannibal closely, who was playing with intense fervor. The piano was still stained with blood, but he didn't seem to mind it. In fact, Will thought, Hannibal was pressing on the bloodstained keys with more intensity than the others.

As for Will himself, when he looked down, he saw that leaning against him was his cello, in the same state it had been when Freddie was killed. Her body was still inside it, her limbs were still missing, and the bloodied bow that had been in her throat was now in Will's right hand, poised to begin playing.

Will continued staring in horror down at him, whilst Hannibal continued to play (it was the third movement of the Tchaikovsky concerto, Will distantly realized). Hannibal watched Will from the corner of his eye questioningly, then stopped playing altogether.

"Won't you join me?" he asked, giving Will a pointed look. His voice echoed and boomed across the stage.

When Will glanced back up, a music stand appeared in front of him, the same stand that he and Freddie would always share at rehearsal. On it was sheet music. Several feet behind the music stand was Hannibal, naturally, looking at Will for a reply.

He couldn't play. He was frozen in shock. No, Will thought, how could he play in this state?

Hannibal appeared to sense Will's answer and frowned, and Will was almost ashamed of himself for making Hannibal look so disappointed. "A pity. I suppose I'll have to play both parts then," he stated. With his left hand, he resumed his playing, and with his right, he pulled a knife from the folds of his tuxedo.

"No," Will said. "No, no." He tried to move, but his cello lay heavily against his chest. He tried to raise his scarlet-stained bow in an attempt to defend himself.

As if Will's perspective had changed, instead of being several yards away, Hannibal was suddenly only a foot away from him now, almost right next to Will. He could smell the pianist's body, decaying in the depths of the piano.

Hannibal started to raise the knife, scintillating in the concert hall lights. "Such a waste," he remarked. "I expected more from you, Will."

Will woke up in a cold sweat, gasping for breath. The dream must have lasted for a while, for the sun was well up and it was nearly noon. The terror of what he had just dreamt lingered. He had dreamt of death before, but not like this. Will had always imagined himself killing others. The look in Hannibal's eyes when he had raised the knife... was somehow exhilarating. There seemed to be a minuscule glimmer in them, a reflection of the knife, perhaps, but it made the act seem like a kind thing. Like an act of mercy, or intimacy. Will, frozen in his seat, unable to defend himself. Like he was helpless, even in real life, to what Hannibal had planned for him. He wondered if there was an audience present in the dream, or if an audience would appear had he looked towards the dark seats facing the stage. If Hannibal's act was a performance. Will shuddered as he thought about it.

He should stop. Will rubbed his temples absently and tried to think about the real world. Dwelling on the dream -- no, nightmare, he should call it for what it is -- would only bring about more confusion. He should focus on the actual murders, not his nonexistent death.

With more resolve, Will began to dress himself and drove to the late pianist's house. He was seeking truth, after all, and perhaps staying at home for too long had been leaving Will cooped up in his own mind. Some time in another space would do him some good. He wondered, with more clarity, if the FBI had connected Freddie's murder to this one.

As he drove by, parked in his usual spot, and stepped over the tape, instead of morbid silence, Will heard music in the background.

Straining his ears, Will noticed that it was the harsh notes of Liszt's *La Campanella* being played. Immediately Will's mind dashed to the last time he had been here -- the stack of music, the piece that had been on the very top. His heart pounded as he slowly stepped toward the living room.

As quiet as he tried to be, Will's footsteps were still audible. The playing ceased, but Will saw dexterous fingers still lingering over the piano keys.

His voice caught in his throat, but he eventually mustered the strength to speak. "Hello, Dr. Lecter."

"Hello, Will," came the response.

"What are you doing here?" Will's voice shook as he spoke. As he thought about it, he realized that Hannibal's car had not been parked anywhere nearby the house.

Yet the man was indeed seated gracefully at the piano. It was, horrifyingly, akin to Will's nightmare. "The same thing as you," he replied, his back still facing Will. "Trespassing at a crime scene."

"You tuned the piano," Will stated.

"A piano has little use when it is out of tune," Hannibal said with a clipped tone. "How does that make you feel?"

Will, after a long pause, in which he thought about his nightmare, responded, "I... am not surprised... Somewhere in the back of my mind, I had expected it." He glanced up at Hannibal. "You knew I would come here?"

A smile crossed Hannibal's face. "I knew you would let curiosity get the better of you."

"... Did you kill her?" The words came out in a rush, the question Will had been grappling with for days finally escaping his lips.

"What do you think?" Hannibal responded gently.

Something about Hannibal's calm demeanor was equally frustrating as well as infatuating. "You... wanted me to find out."

Hannibal nodded. He turned back to the piano and slowly moved the fallboard over the keys so that it wouldn't make a sound. "You were clever enough to connect the dots."

"Did you kill Freddie too?" It was difficult to hide the trembling in his tone, in his hands as they clenched into fists.

"Yes, Freddie too," Hannibal said.

How was Hannibal so casual about this reveal? The weight of his honesty was crushing, and yet Will could not help but feel drawn into Hannibal's stark words. Hannibal should be arrested, sent to jail.

Even if Will held no role in the justice system he felt like justice should play its role. Will thought about apprehending the man, but his hunting rifle was in his car, and he had no weapon on him. A quick glance at Hannibal's person revealed that there was the faint outline of what was most likely a switchblade in the pocket of his pleated trousers. It was no use, Will decided. Hannibal would easily overpower him in a fight. Evidently, there was no point in trying. Will found that this idea was easier to abandon than it should have been.

"I should turn you in." Will was nearly whispering, and his jaw shook as he spoke.

"You won't," Hannibal asserted, his voice equally quiet and low.

Will shuddered at the veracity of his statement. "No, I won't."

Hannibal took a few steps closer. His expression held some sort of satisfaction. Will's heart jumped in his chest, thinking perhaps he was next, that his dream had been a prophetic one, somehow, that he was bound to die at the hands of Hannibal Lecter. But no, Hannibal was not reaching for his poorly hidden weapon.

"Why did you do it?" Will felt a lump in his throat.

"You wanted Freddie dead," Hannibal said simply.

Will blinked. "I never -- No, I didn't."

"But you wanted to be section leader. You wanted to take her seat. Have I ever denied you something you did not want, dear Will?"

Another shiver went through Will as he realized that Hannibal had indeed made him section leader by killing Freddie. He remembered how he had confessed that he felt responsible for her death, and now that only seemed to ring even more true. The memories of his conversations with Freddie, the envy he had felt, and the lingering desire to prove himself all came rushing back. He had dismissed those feelings as normal ambitions, but now they seemed tainted by the darkness surrounding him.

“Will you kill me too?” he questioned, even though he already knew the answer.

A soft expression adorned Hannibal’s face. “No,” he replied, though it seemed like he had considered the question. “I find you far too fascinating to meet such an end.”

"But you killed them."

"I had to protect you."

"I don't *need* protecting," Will insisted. "How could that pianist have anything to do with me?"

"She was preventing me from meeting you," Hannibal said.

Will's eyes widened, and as they did, Hannibal stepped closer and offered Will a kind smile. He should have been repulsed, horrified by it, but he wasn't. Instead, a sudden understanding dawned on Will. "Freddie said -- you saw my spring recital. That you knew me... before the first rehearsal. You killed the pianist so you could take her chair. And you killed Freddie so I could take her chair."

Hannibal's countenance seemed to relax. He began to raise his right hand. Will flinched, as he was still anticipating an attack of some sort, but Hannibal brought his hand to Will's face, thumb caressing the stubble that lined his jaw. "My dear Will. You see me perfectly."

As Hannibal's intentions became clearer, thought became a foreign concept. "I -- I don't -- Hannibal -- " Will stammered, his lip trembling. "I can't do -- do this."

Hannibal cupped Will's cheek, his palm cool and accepting. His thumb moved to trace Will's quivering bottom lip. "You already have. Embrace it."

"I'm... not like you."

"You are not," Hannibal agreed. "But you have seen what we share, what makes us equal."

Will had seen. Hannibal understood Will on a molecular level, the same way Will did Hannibal. It both terrified and excited him beyond measure. He couldn't remember the last time he was ever in such proximity to another like this. In Hannibal's eyes was adoration that

was beyond any kind of societal morality. "I should turn you in," Will said again, but the words sounded more like a plea this time.

"And what would that accomplish? Would that bring them back from the dead? Would that erase our connection?" Hannibal asked.

"No, it won't. It wouldn't," Will admitted. "But it would be justice. It would be right."

Hannibal's thumb brushed over Will's lip again. "Would it please you, to see me behind bars? Imprisoned?"

"No," Will answered. "But it's not about pleasing me," he argued, or tried to argue. "Society says you should be behind bars."

"Dear Will, it is all about pleasing you. You will never be satisfied unless you embrace your becoming."

Will shook under his words. He didn't know what to say.

"Tell me, Will. Can you live with the knowledge of what I've done?"

"I don't think I can live without it." Will swallowed. It felt nearly painful. "Hannibal... I don't know what to do."

"That's alright. I will wait for you."

Making eye contact for a brief moment and then staring at a spot behind Hannibal, Will asked, "Wait for me to do what, exactly?"

"Wait for you to decide, to come to terms with who you are." He paused. "The concert is in two days. I won't solo with the Baltimore Philharmonic again should you not desire my presence. You can forget about me if you would like. You can live a half-existence, never satisfying that underlying darkness."

"What... What is the other option?"

"You can stay with me, accept who you are."

"I -- I don't know if I can do it," Will confessed, his words wavering. "I've always been a person who believes in right and wrong."

"You can still be a person who believes in right and wrong, Will. You must only change what you define to be right." Hannibal's hand slid down from Will's cheek to his shoulder, reassuring. "Whatever you choose, you know where to find me."

He squeezed Will's shoulder, and then he walked back toward the piano and pushed the bench so that it was directly under it. Will watched, mildly stupefied from the conversation. Hannibal then took the sheet music from the music desk of the piano and placed it on the stack with the rest of the music the late pianist had possessed.

"Until tomorrow, Will," Hannibal said, then left out the back door.

Will didn't even consider following him. Now that Hannibal's presence was gone Will could breathe. Either he could pretend like nothing happened, or get with this... murderer. He knew any normal person would pick the first option. Will had always considered himself normal, or rather that he could masquerade the idea closely enough. He should pick the first option. He couldn't, shouldn't, succumb to something so wrong. Yet he had a feeling he had already made his decision on the matter, and that it wasn't subject to change anytime soon, let alone the next two days.

He couldn't simply forget about Hannibal, not when the man was in his thoughts every passing minute. But he could not also forget about his moral compass either. The line between good and evil was blurrier than Will ever imagined.

Steeling his mind, he exited the house several minutes later and drove to the music building.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will found the concertmistress of the Baltimore Philharmonic playing absently in a practice room. He knocked on the door, and she unlocked it and let him in.

"Bedelia," Will breathed. "Hello."

"Will. I haven't seen your face around the building for a while."

"Yeah... sorry for... disturbing your practicing."

"I am quite sure whatever you are about to tell me is much more important than Paganini," she said with a smile. She carefully placed her bow on the stand and lowered her violin, cradling it in her right arm. "Go on."

"You were right, about Hannibal," Will said. "He told me, told me what he's done and he -- wants me to decide whether to stay with him or not."

"Ah," Bedelia said softly. "Will you stay with him?"

"That's the thing... I don't know," he replied.

"I presume you've come to seek advice. As someone who has known Hannibal for many years... I've never seen him so infatuated with another as he is with you."

"What?" Will was astonished. "How do you know that?"

"He has mentioned you... in our conversations. Unprompted. He adores you, Will."

"...Why?" Will managed.

Bedelia's smile grew. "I think you know why."

"But you told me I was a... moth, fluttering towards a flame," Will remembered.

"I did say that, yes, before I realized the extent of Hannibal's devotion to you. He has drawn in people before, for his own benefit. I imagined you were one of them." Her fingers pressed against the fingerboard of her violin. "But now I realize it is quite the opposite. I would even go so far to say that Hannibal is the moth."

"And I the flame?"

"Yes. Sometimes, the moth willingly embraces the fire, knowing that it may be consumed by its intensity. There is beauty in that willingness, in the surrender to something greater than oneself. It is as Don Marquis said…we get bored with the routine / and crave beauty / and

excitement / fire is beautiful / and we know that if we get / too close it will kill us / but what does that matter."

"I never saw myself as... exciting, like that."

"Perhaps you did not intend to draw Hannibal in, but, nevertheless, he is infatuated."

Hesitating, Will asked, "What would you do, if you were in my shoes?"

"I was in your shoes," Bedelia stated, "many years ago, when we both in the university orchestra. I chose to follow Hannibal, of course. Eventually, we parted ways. It was mere coquetry. He did not kill for me as does you."

Will had not named Hannibal's crimes in order not to give Bedelia a shock. To hear that she had known all along, was unexpected, and even irking. "You know? What he's done?"

"I knew," Bedelia responded. "But it is not about what I know. It's about your decision."

"I don't know what to choose."

"I think you do, if you chose to talk to me," Bedelia said with that knowing smile. "Now, I will have to get back to practicing."

She shut the door.

Will mulled over both Bedelia and Hannibal's words. He never imagined that they had a relationship in the past... and couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to have Hannibal in that way. But that would mean accepting him and his crimes, and embracing Will's own darkness. Additionally, Bedelia said that Hannibal was drawn to Will, that he talked about him. Will never thought he was something to be talked about.

The following day was Friday, the last rehearsal before the concert. Luckily, Jack did not require concert attire. Still, Will expected the atmosphere to be awkward. That people would intentionally avoid the topic of Freddie's murder, despite the orchestra playing in the same hall her body had been just a week ago.

"Will! I'm so glad you're alright!" Alana exclaimed when Will took his regular seat. He couldn't bear to sit in Freddie's seat just yet.

"Yeah, I just wanted to distance myself from this place for a bit," he replied.

"Dr. Lecter asked me about you, too," Alana said. "He seemed worried."

"He texted me, yeah."

Will thought about disclosing all that had occurred yesterday. It would have to be vague, at any rate.

Throughout the rehearsal, Will couldn’t bring himself to meet Hannibal’s eye. Almost equally terrifying was Bedelia’s watchful gaze, seated on Hannibal’s left. As Will expected, there was a forced normalcy in everyone’s discussions, like nothing had changed, like a major instrumentalist hadn’t been murdered.

When they got a break in the middle, Will got his chance. He asked Alana, "If you had a choice between living your normal life or living a life that is full of freedom, but not morally acceptable, which would you choose?"

"Oh, wow," Alana chuckled. "Did you take a philosophy class while you were gone?"

Will managed a weak smile. "Well... um, it's that I care about someone, but this someone has done terrible things."

"Will Graham found someone?" Alana's eyes brightened. "I thought I'd never see the day."

"Ha, ha," Will said sardonically.

"Alright, I'll stop with the teasing. Hmm..." Alana dwelled on Will's dilemma. "I don't think you should stay with this person, especially if they're damaging others somehow."

Will felt slightly more sane hearing her speak. "I just... I don't think I'll find anyone like this person again."

"You're fine. There's plenty of fish in the sea," Alana assured him.

Plenty of fish in the sea, my ass, Will thought. No one would ever be interested in him after Hannibal. Or, at least, no one that would offer Will such a grand gesture. Was that what Freddie was, a grand gesture?

"Is this about Dr. Lecter?" Alana suddenly asked.

"W-What?" Will sputtered. "No?"

"Oh. It was just -- You're looking at him."

Will's gaze had indeed erred towards Hannibal, who was speaking with Bedelia. Will would not be surprised if his name came up in their conversation. "Just thinking," he said, which wasn't entirely false.

"Alright," Alana responded. "I never thought your love life would be more interesting than mine..."

Will let a dry laugh escape him. "Trust me, I didn't either."

Chapter End Notes

The poem Bedelia quotes is called "the lesson of the moth by archy" by Don Marquis.

And yes, I know this chapter was a bit on the dull side. Apologies for that, hopefully these last two chapters will make up for it!

Chapter 9

Once more, Will Graham found himself in his tuxedo, but this time it was for the concert. The weeks of preparation, the rehearsals, the practicing, it had all culminated in this moment. Will thought back to the last time he had worn it, how little he had known all those weeks ago. Hannibal's penetrating and knowing look had nearly stopped Will's heart in the first rehearsal. But he had never expected the profound man would play a larger role in his life.

As he saw the bright lights showcasing the stage, Will thought about his choice. Hannibal promised fulfillment and liberation if Will chose to stay by his side. Bedelia told Will that Hannibal adored Will, and that he should stay. Alana had urged him to find someone else, to seek a more conventional path to happiness.

With or without these inputs, Will knew what his decision was. In truth, he had already made his decision the moment he set eyes on Hannibal.

Still, there was a concert to perform. Will tried not to dwell on the decision that lay upon him, and took his seat. Principal cellist, he thought. He had always imagined that one day the lights would shine and he would be section leader, after a lucky audition one year. But not like this, never like this. Not through what Hannibal had done.

Soon the entire orchestra was seated. The lights over the audience began to dim, and Jack entered the hall and bowed as applause filled the room. He began to speak to the audience, about the unfortunate events that had impeded the orchestra's performance ability, et cetera, et cetera. As Jack spoke, Will observed his new position. Now he sat directly across from Bedelia, who was carefully checking the pitch of her violin strings. Alana was a seat further away from him.

Will could see Hannibal on the right side of the stage, outside of the audience's view, awaiting Jack's cue to walk up front. He wondered how Hannibal was feeling. Not only was he the solo player, but he must also be uncertain of what Will's decision was to be. Surely he must be nervous, Will thought, despite Hannibal's self-assured expression.

Jack introduced Dr. Hannibal Lecter to the audience, and Hannibal smiled and walked up to the middle of the stage with an easy politeness. The whole orchestra watched him bow, then take his seat at the piano.

Jack looked at Hannibal expectantly. "Ready?" he asked, in a hushed tone, just for courtesy's sake.

Hannibal nodded, looking serious. "Yes, go ahead." His gaze seemed to stray from Jack and drifted to Will for a moment.

The first movement began, an *Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso* to start off the piano concerto. Will’s hands initially trembled as he positioned his bow on his cello, trying to push away his overwhelming thoughts. The French horn melody at the beginning -- Will glanced toward the brass section and heard the small amount of boredom (how could one be bored

with Tchaikovsky, he had no clue) in the player, but no matter. The orchestra's accented notes concluding the phrase in the first few measures were outstanding enough.

When Hannibal came in with his ascending chords, Will felt a chill run down his back, even with the bright heat of the stage lights. Hannibal seemed to have taken the piece a couple beats faster than the intended tempo. Only a couple, no matter, Will thought again. The orchestra easily adjusted to the sense of urgency that weighed behind Hannibal's chords.

By the start of the slower and more reflective second movement, Hannibal had realized his tempo issue and returned to the proper metronome marking (now *Andantino semplice*). The notes were soothing, and Will almost forgot about the decision, the performance altogether, as the sound enveloped him.

Will's hands trembled at the climax of the piece, his mind consumed. The music was like a caress. He could still feel the touch of Hannibal's hand on his cheek, the warmth of his gaze, and the weight of his choices. Here he was, playing a piece he loved, in the seat he loved, with the people he loved, leading the section, and it was all thanks to Hannibal. How could Will deny Hannibal his mere presence, when Hannibal had already given him so much?

It was breathtaking to witness the final movement. Hannibal's fingers moved at lightning speed as his hands jumped to various keys of the Steinway. He seemed to be stroking the keys as he played the chords, coaxing the sound from the instrument. A sheen of sweat coated his brow. Will thought it was an endearing sign of his humanity.

The chord at the end rang out through the concert hall. Will held onto the final B flat, crunching his bow on the string, his right hand wildly pronated, his left hand shaking furiously in a passionate *vibrato*. As he did so, he looked up and saw Hannibal looking back at him, his hands positioned on the keys, his forehead gleaming with perspiration. He looked wonderfully undone by the music, by Will.

Will's breath left his lungs in a rush as he heaved, not taking his eyes off the soloist. With Hannibal's eyes on him Will felt seen for the first time in his life.

Pure silence as the last of the *fermata* note was absorbed, then the audience began to applaud. Hannibal stood up, bowed, and shook hands with Jack and Bedelia, as per concerto custom. The audience was still clapping. Hannibal looked towards them with a satisfied smile and bowed again, causing some superfluous cheering to emerge from the crowd.

Jack gestured for the rest of the orchestra to stand up, and so they arose from their seats. Even as Will faced the audience, he stole glances to his right, where Hannibal stood. The audience's applause seemed never-ending at first, but it soon began to die down.

Most of the orchestra started to file off the stage, to go to the rehearsal room to pack up. Hannibal lingered backstage, looking deep in thought.

Approaching him, Will called, "Hannibal."

Glancing up, Hannibal seemed astonished to see Will there. "Will," he uttered. His expression held a mixture of surprise and anxiety as he absently brushed a few strands of ash blond hair

that clung to the sides of his face. "I presume you have made a decision."

"I have," Will said. The air appeared to clear in the hall as most of the audience started to leave. The room felt less oppressive. It grew quiet, and he eventually continued, "I don't want to live a half-life. I want to be by your side."

For once, Hannibal was at a loss for words. A small smile spread across his face, one of relief. "My Will," he pronounced. "I knew you could choose correctly."

"I did," Will responded. Then he clarified: "I did want Freddie dead." It came out in one exhale, like he had to rid himself of the notion. "I have never allowed anyone to know these... thoughts of mine. I've allowed myself more vulnerability in your presence alone than I have my entire life."

"Vulnerability is an invitation to intimacy, to authenticity. It takes a great amount of courage to lower your walls."

Will walked towards Hannibal, fidgeted with the cuffs of his jacket. "It's exposing. But also liberating. Would you be like that, with me?"

"You have seen more of me than anyone else, I assure you."

"Even Bedelia?"

Hannibal chuckled, a light sound. "Yes, even her. You've spoken with her, I imagine. Miss Du Maurier... Well, it is a bit of a long story, but I shall tell you later. You should, at the least, pack your cello. Have you replaced your cello already?" He nodded to the cello laying on its side next to Will, the bow resting on top.

"I have two cellos," Will said. "Well, had." He picked up his cello with one hand and bow with the other, then began to walk to the door. Hannibal walked behind him, his hands carefully positioned behind his back. "The one you... ahem, destroyed... was the one I use for rehearsals. This one is for performances."

"I see," Hannibal said, looking somewhat abashed.

"Don't worry. I forgive you," Will said, turning to Hannibal.

Will stopped walking abruptly, Hannibal following suit. He gave Will a questioning glance, wondering what the reason was for the sudden stop.

"Sorry," Will muttered. "Will you forgive me?" He placed the endpin of his cello on the floor, then switched the hand he was holding it with and shook his other wrist. Then he adjusted his things so that he was holding both his cello and bow in one hand only, and his music folder under his arm. Hannibal eyed him with interest, though still puzzled at Will's question.

Will glanced back up at him, and stepped very close to Hannibal, who cleared his throat awkwardly, and said, "Forgive you for stopping? Of course, your instrument is quite heavy, after all --"

His voice fell silent as Will kissed him. His cello and his bow were still clasped in his left hand. His right hand, however, laid on Hannibal's shoulder, allowing him better leverage.

Hannibal's face had turned pink by the time Will pulled away. His flustered expression was a novel and delightful sight for Will to witness. After several moments of shocked silence, he managed to say, "Yes, I -- I do think I can forgive you for that."

Will laughed. It felt like his first real laugh in weeks. "I caught you off guard."

"Indeed you did. I had not expected you to be so... eager," Hannibal replied, slowly but surely regaining his composure. "Although, it was a pleasant surprise."

They started to walk again and arrived at the rehearsal room, Will having a stupid grin on his face. Hannibal waited at the doorway whilst Will consoled his case. As he packed his instrument, he wondered how else he could catch Hannibal off guard, and his grin only grew.

"Let me take you to dinner," Hannibal suggested, Will rolling his cello case behind him.

"You'll be cooking?"

"As always."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will had been to Hannibal's house on more than one occasion by now, so the idea should not have seemed so daunting. Yet he had a feeling that this time would be especially unique.

He currently followed Hannibal's Bentley through Baltimore. As much as Will wanted to ride in the car with Hannibal, his own car posed a problem. He wondered if Hannibal was watching him through the rearview mirror. He wondered if they would kiss again, or maybe go a bit further than kissing. Will had dated before, but most people found him a bit on the eccentric side, so his relationships tended toward the short-lived. He'd never dated a man, though. Or a confirmed murderer.

Once they arrived at his house, Hannibal appeared to be more hesitant than normal. The pink on his cheeks hadn't completely faded. "I will be in the kitchen. Please, make yourself at home," he said, not looking at Will.

He wasn't expecting Will to follow him to the kitchen, it seemed, and nearly jumped when Will snuck up behind him and started speaking. "So, do you have time to tell me about Bedelia now?"

"The green-eyed monster has taken hold of you," Hannibal replied. "Nevertheless your intrigue is understandable. She was... we formed a relationship out of curiosity, not interest. I imagine you have had relations like that, at the university age. She was kind to me, but I do not think she ever truly understood me. She is not like me in the way that you are."

"But she knew what you did," Will pointed out. "That you've... taken lives."

"She did, yes," Hannibal affirmed. He turned the heat on and placed a pan on it, carefully pouring some oil and a square of butter. Will watched the fire emerge from the gas stove, intrigued. "I'm sure you have heard of the bystander effect. The murder of Kitty Genovese, perhaps. Bedelia was of this bystander type. She did not possess a darkness of her own. But she also did not try to stop me."

Will seemed to process these words for a moment, nodding thoughtfully. "Have you been with anyone since?"

"No. Bedelia was many years ago."

"Well then," Will stated, his lips quirking a bit. "We're in the same boat, in that sense."

The oil and butter concoction was starting to sizzle, and Hannibal mixed the various vegetables he had frying in it with a spatula. "I take it that you don't participate in dating very often."

"Most people don't want to know what goes on in my head."

"I imagine they are intimidated by your thoughts. But I find it alluring."

Will was surprised to feel his own cheeks heat up. "You're not like most people."

"No, I suppose I'm not," Hannibal said with a chuckle.

He continued to cook whilst Will watched him. It was interesting to see Hannibal in his element. An overwhelming urge to kiss him again overtook Will. He couldn't help but think about how Hannibal might react.

He leaned in, a small kiss on the cheek at first. Hannibal turned his head, and their noses momentarily bumped before their lips aligned. Will felt Hannibal smile against him. Before it could get too far, however, Hannibal pulled back, and whispered, "You will taste far better after dinner."

And well if that didn't get Will thinking. "You do love testing my patience."

"The anticipation will heighten the pleasure, I assure you," Hannibal responded. He brushed Will's hair away, for it had started to fall in front of his face. "Allow me to prepare the meat as well, then we will eat."

In another bowl was some beef, cut into large cubes. Hannibal added some more oil to a pot with what Will would have categorized as a performative flourish. It seemed reminiscent of when Hannibal watched Will practice, when it had inadvertently turned into a performance. As the meat began to brown, Hannibal asked, "Will, would you be able to get a bottle of red wine? If I remember correctly there is a Chateau Margaux 2011 Merlot bottle in the pantry."

It seemed like Hannibal was going to use it for his cooking. Will went to the pantry and was astonished by how many drinks were lined against the wall. After pulling out at least ten bottles and squinting at the label, he found the correct one and returned.

"Thank you," said Hannibal, his fingers grazing Will's as he took the bottle.

"Of course."

Hannibal proceeded to deglaze the pot with the wine, and added the vegetables from the other pan to the pot. As he did this, he asked, "What did you think of the concert? I notice you have not mentioned it."

"I was speechless, naturally. Your playing, it's -- spectacular," Will said. "So much emotion, but not in a cathartic sense like in the first rehearsal. I could tell you really thought about this time."

"I'm glad you liked it. Did you have a particular part you enjoyed?"

Will paused, then replied, "In the second movement... there is a part where the only instruments playing are the first desk -- me and Freddie -- of the cellos, and the piano solo." Will looked to Hannibal for confirmation.

It was a long piece, so Hannibal did have to think about it for a moment. "I believe I do know what you are talking about."

"Well, this performance, first desk was -- was just me," Will said. "I mean -- you saw. Jack did not bother to move all the cellos up one so last minute, it would ruin the *divisi* sections and whatnot. So it was just you and me, we were the only ones playing, for those four measures, before the other instruments joined in."

"And how did that make you feel?" Hannibal inquired.

The cheek of the man. "Delicate intimacy. It was such a playful melody. Your little staccato chords, myself with the sweeping slurred notes... it made me relish the time I got to share with you on the stage, no matter how I had gotten there or what had happened before."

"It was our own private performance."

"Yes, it was." The pot simmered lightly in the background of their conversation.

"Music conveys emotions that transcend the notes on the page."

"It transcends language, escapes common words," Will murmured in agreement.

Hannibal cooked in relative silence for a few minutes longer whilst Will tried to put a word to how he felt right now, or even how he felt during the concert. There truly was no word for it.

"Will," started Hannibal, softly, as if not to disturb the quietude in the room. "If you could seat yourself at the table. I will follow you shortly."

Will left to sit at the table, and a few minutes later Hannibal arrived with his characteristic covered silver tray, which Will found amusing, since he had already seen what Hannibal was cooking. Old habits die hard, he figured. The smell was delectable as Hannibal uncovered the dish. He had added some parsley garnish to the dish, Will saw. He glanced up apprehensively, waiting for the chef to illustrate just what he had cooked, but Hannibal remained curiously silent.

Instead, Hannibal poured a portion of the stew into the bowl in front of Will and some for himself. Then with the same bottle of wine he had deglazed the pot with, he began to pour into a glass for both Will and himself.

He watched Will pointedly as the cellist began to eat. Will closed his eyes, savoring the flavor. Yes, as pedestrian as his tongue may be, the taste of the wine had been prominent. The beef had a complex taste on his palate. Will hoped that with time his tastebuds could grow more accustomed to such gourmet delicacies. He hummed gently around the food. "This is very good."

Hannibal joined him. "I am only glad that I am not eating alone."

They ate in silence for a moment longer, until Will mustered his courage and asked, "So... this is bœuf bourguignon?"

"I did follow a recipe for that, yes. Although there is a... special ingredient."

Only mildly unsettled, Will asked, "Which is?"

"Freddie Lounds," Hannibal replied, gently.

Will's fork froze in mid-air, hesitating to take the next bite. *That's* what happened to her limbs. He had nearly forgotten about her, which he then felt ashamed about. He could not believe he had... eaten his stand partner. He was shocked, then fascinated, then shocked that he was fascinated. "Freddie?" he repeated, voice low. "Is this what you do with all your... victims?"

Hannibal continued to eat, not taking his eyes off Will. "Only the ones that deserve it."

"How many?" Will didn't know if he meant victims that had been eaten, or just victims in general.

"Many, many more than just two."

Although Will was not surprised by Hannibal's answer, he was surprised he hadn't run out the door yet. Instead, a strange sense of acceptance washed over him. He had already chosen Hannibal despite the murders, after all. "We all consume each other, one way or another. This is just one of those ways."

Hannibal had a pleased smile. "We all hunger for something," he mused. "Now, Freddie will serve more purpose in her death than in her life. We can become one with the essence of the consumed."

Will understood Hannibal's logic, as twisted as it was. At this point, he was no stranger to Hannibal's darkness, nor his own. This was just another facet of it. If the man had peculiar food choices what was Will to do about it?

With some hesitation, he took another bite. He thought that perhaps his knowledge would alter his taste in the food, but it didn't. It was just as delicious.

"Do you regret your decision?" asked Hannibal.

"No," Will said firmly. "I've always felt like I was at the brink, trying to maintain some semblance of normalcy. But... I don't have to do that anymore."

"Do you see now, Will? Your becoming?"

"Yes, Hannibal. It's... all I ever wanted for myself. It's beautiful."

And so, they finished their dinner.

Chapter End Notes

Just as this month comes to an end, it's done! Some things have been added when I edited so it is a bit over my initial prediction of the 16k words I thought this would be. Two things I would like to say before I go.
1. The way Hannibal cooks the beef bourguignon is hideously inaccurate and I know. He needed to let the pot sit for several hours.
2. If you're an orchestra nerd like me, I will tell you that what I wrote to be Will's favorite part of the Tchaikovsky concerto is right here: https://youtu.be/8pqvCIFJS2E?t=1378

I hope you enjoyed reading! This was my first Hannibal fic. I have some ideas for more in the future so expect to see those floating around sometime :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!